

EDUCATOR AS A CURATOR. *MUSEUM POWER* EXHIBITION AS EXPERIMENT TO EXTEND MUSEUM EDUCATION FIELD

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A painting on the wall and a laid table in front of it. An armour on a plinth and a carpet on which everybody can walk freely. This is one of the means of educators extending the strategy field when displaying Polish art at the National Museum in Krakow (MNK). This setting invites the public to visit the *Museum Power* Exhibition talking about the language of exhibitions and teaching how to decipher basic museum conventions. Open to the public in November 2020–April 2021, the Exhibition could be visited in MNK's main building, and was curated by Anna Grzelak, Dorota Jędruch, Danuta Macheta, Katarzyna Mrugała, Filip Skowron, Joanna Zaguła, in cooperation with Marta Graczyńska and Izabela Stawarz. The Exhibition's coordinator was Katarzyna Pawłowska, while the layout was designed by the LATALA design studio (Dagmara Łatała, Jacek Łatała, in cooperation with Szymon Zakrzewski).¹ The whole space of the *Museum Power* was divided into 20 zones talking about art perception within the context of visitors' various preferences and predispositions, as well as curatorial display strategies. The original arrangements of respective rooms holding works by such female and male artists as Olga Boznańska, Alina Szapocznikow, Maria

Pinińska-Bereś, Jerzy Kossak, Tadeusz Kantor, Jan Matejko, or Jacek Malczewski served to ask questions dealing with e.g., role of light, frame, sound, smell, visitor's body position in the process of creating, experiencing, and interpreting the work, or the role of knowledge in the reception of a work of art.

Enjoy the Feast display space

When implementing their genuine project the staff of the education department created a curatorial team, thus transforming the hierarchy of museum modes of knowledge production, in which they coincided with the tendencies related to the 'educational turn'.² This understood broadly as shifting the museum's main focus and function towards educational activity,³ which may lead to blurring the borderlines between art, education, and curatorial practices,⁴ yet which is at the same time perceived as a tendency securing the survival of museums in the 21st century.⁵ Over the last dozen or so years in Polish museology projects shifting the up-to-now system have been implemented pointing to the value of the educational perspective. Let us mention,



1. Enjoy the Feast display space

among others: *5 Senses. Audiodescription* (National Museum in Poznan), *What's Got the Lace to Do with the Windmill? The Netherlands* (National Museum in Poznan), *The 'Anything Goes' Museum* (National Museum in Warsaw), *Long Live the Museum* (National Museum in Wrocław), *ms3 Re:akcja* and *Find Art* (Museum of Art in Łódź). Moreover, the consequences of the educational turn in art are also of major impact, however, they are of marginal relevance to our considerations (e.g. the *Wybory.pl* Project by Artur Żmijewski and Paweł Althamer).⁶

Harmonizing with the research tackling the 'educational turn', we would like to show how educators succeeded in extending the field of museum education activity within the structures of the National Museum. Our intention is to identify the strategies which proved helpful and effective in a large institution of a long-standing organizational tradition. We consider this an important topic in view of a visible discrepancy between the direction in which the reorganization of thinking about the museum as an institution is heading and the still visible tendency in Polish museology to clearly distinguish the curatorial practice from the educational one.⁷ This is revealed in the organizational separation of the exhibition creation process from the work on its educational layer, the latter treated as an accompanying programme. Education often continues to perform an ancillary,⁸ service role,⁹ regarded as marginal versus curatorial work, while its potential is not put to a full use.¹⁰

At the same time, a debate on the ways in which museums shape knowledge¹¹ and what the process of shifting their mission and implemented projects towards the

educational¹² and participatory¹³ perspectives may look like has been ongoing. These are relevant topics owing to the long-lasting process of repositioning of museums within the socio-cultural field¹⁴ and transforming the manners of understanding relations with the public¹⁵ who are to be involved in the process of co-creating knowledge and shaping institutional changes.¹⁶ In many models popular today it is building a responsible cooperation with local communities that is attributed the key importance; furthermore, questions are posed in relation to education's responsibility and role.¹⁷ Interestingly, education departments are often at the forefront of the changes connected with the introduction of accessibility policies and the implementations of solutions integrating subsequent groups with special needs with the museum community.¹⁸

Materials and methods

Our perspective on the 'educational turn' shall be limited to the analysis of changes in the dynamics of designing exhibitions. Such studies have been conducted, demonstrating the potential of cooperation with educators,¹⁹ yet rarely tackling the means of shifting the field of education activity on the institutional level. The research was carried out in 2020 and 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore its mixed format was adopted.²⁰ It was performed in stages, and the initially planned meetings with the Exhibition's curators were extended to include interviews with the individuals pointed to by the interviewees. In total, six FGIs with educators-curators, educators, curators, conservators,

and teachers were conducted, as well as three interviews with museum attendants. Furthermore, two individual interviews: with the Exhibition coordinator and with the Head of MNK's Prevention Department were conducted. Additionally, seven Exhibition-inspired workshops were observed. We could also resort to an extensive set of documentation referring to respective work stages.

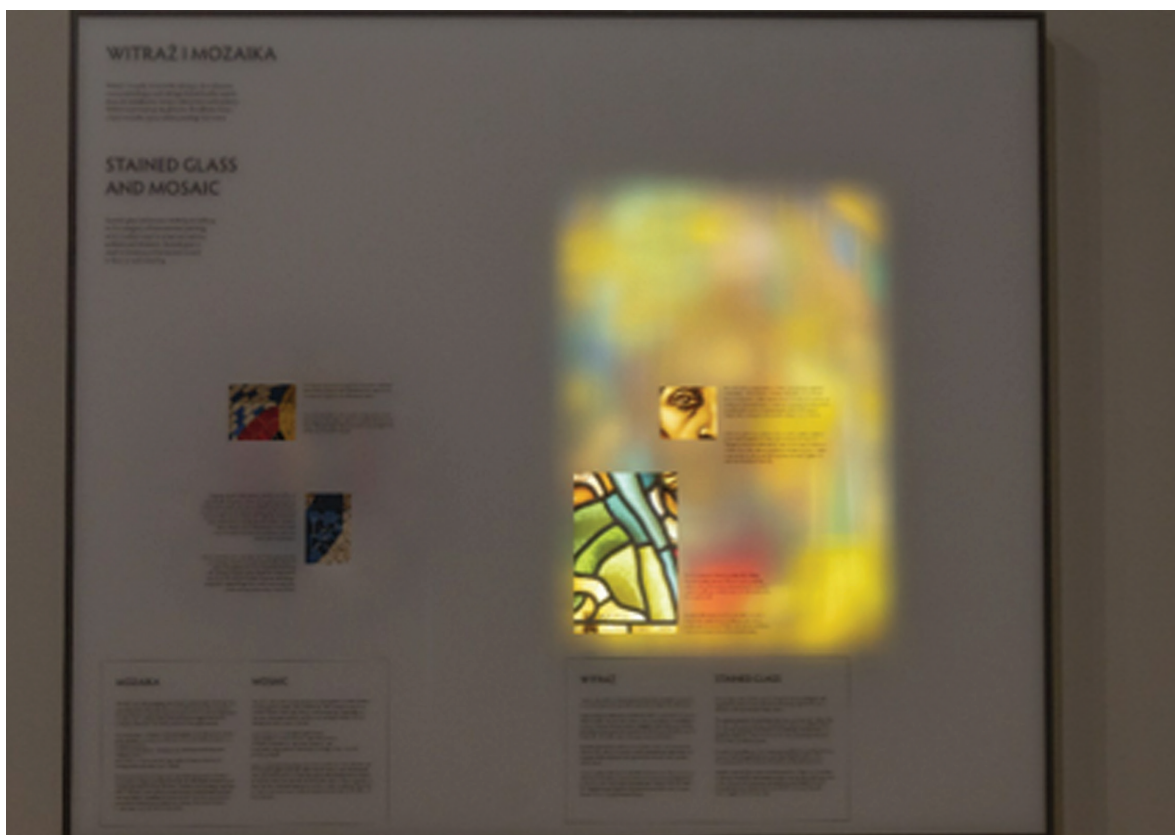
All the collected data served as the grounds for the semiotic analysis of content, in harmony with the methodological requirements defined, e.g., by Earl Babbie.²¹ We have also applied the methods of the institutional analysis drawing inspiration from the findings of institutional critique,²² trying to identify the organizational framework within which the extension of the field of educational praxis in both discursive and pragmatic dimensions was occurring.²³ In the later part of the paper we will focus on three areas in which the shift was observed: the character of and knowledge organizing the display; perception and application of educators' competences; as well as shaping informal relations and producing institutional trust.

Field shift: knowledge

In the case of the *Museum Power* Exhibition the appointment of the team of curators composed of the staff of the Education Department required an important move. First of all the educators meeting the challenge of creating the *Museum Power* unanimously decided that their intention

was not to create an educational exhibition, but simply a good one. This move is in our eyes of key importance. The extension of the museum education field within the area of cooperation with curators is possible only when educators are involved as co-authors, and not merely as specialists in education carriers and accompanying programmes. At the same time, this shift is the hardest owing to the borderlines set by the scopes of responsibilities, as well as by the institutional and project routines.

A good intermediate step is to propose and attempt at educators mounting exhibitions which explore the issues related to accessibility, the status of the public, and the museum as such. MNK's educators combined all these pathways. They decided to identify their distinctive position in the skill of experimenting both with the content and form adjusted to a definite visitor.²⁴ Their activity was not aimed at a concept which would either explicitly or implicitly be connected with the education department, but at an educational approach to designing the space of transmitting knowledge with the character of the target group in mind. The curators' assumption was to give visitors tools to read the museum message, at the same time revealing and explaining various display strategies to them. They applied their knowledge of the technique of an artwork making or the material used creating the *Technical Problems* space. Placing an artwork behind an opaque screen, they deliberately directed the visitors' attention to the chosen fragments and execution details: brushstrokes, paint washing, or the course of the crayon line.²⁵



2. *Technical Problems* display space



3. *Masterpiece* display space

Technical Problems display space

Furthermore, they equally valued expertise in didactics of museum work and competences in the psychology of an artwork reception, which the team applied to create e.g., the *Masterpiece* display space. A button from the late 18th century, embedded within a very unique display setting, was used for the reflection on the role of organizational means and extensive curatorial texts for creating masterpieces.

Masterpiece display space

The authors also experimented with designing display strategies addressed to varied groups of the public, including those with special needs: cognitive, emotional,

psychosomatic. For example, the arrangement of *Body in Space* served as a pretext to ask questions related to discomfort, physical tiredness, or the feeling of being lost amidst exhibitions' monumental rooms and labyrinths.²⁶

Body in Space display space

We can, thus, see how the Exhibition became a place allowing to test various competences of the team. Furthermore, it was a metacommentary revealing how the taking into account of definite knowledge related to the didactic process or perception of a work of art can affect the final shape of the display. This procedure in a way undermined the common museum order in which the key role was played by the knowledge of the collection, already at the beginning of



4. *Body in Space* display space

All photos were taken by Antoni Michalski.

the work on the Exhibition inspiring varied commentaries, sometimes voicing doubt. And it actually started an internal debate on the priorities in museum curator's work, in effect leading to an agreement, or maybe boosting the courage of other staff members to experiment when working with an artwork.

The basic action which can help to extend the field of museum education, and present in the described strategy of the MNK's educators, is the emphasizing at every possible stage: from the first conceptual meetings up to the Exhibition itself, that the work on a display is presently a complex process, using various types of competences which remain inseparable: these referring to deepening the factual knowledge, which is at the basis of each display, are always connected with those allowing to implement effective learning modes, involvement, and inclusive participation in culture. The initiating of a debate within the museum on educators' knowledge and competences is essential in this respect for their involvement in the curatorial process as exhibition's co-authors in full right to be considered at all.

Field shift: education

Our analyses do demonstrate that raising the qualifications of the education department staff does not boost the chances to create curatorial-educational teams, since the problem is more in the supposed position of educators in museums resulting from the former hierarchizations. In order to change this initiatives overcoming the routine and giving chances to undertake risks in situations when new

operating rules have not as yet been worked out and tested are needed.²⁷

The *Museum Power* Exhibition questioned the so-far structures of work organization and modes serving the distribution of the prestige and idea of competence limits, though its production frameworks remained in harmony with design works in place in the institution. Furthermore, the creation of the Exhibition did not require going beyond the existing knowledge of the educators and their skills. Actually, educators, more often than not, boast a similar educational background as individuals employed as curators. In the case of the *Museum Power* Exhibition among the six curators, there were academics with PhD titles, people writing their doctoral dissertation, authors of academic papers, as well as individuals boasting rich and varied experience acquired in the course of digitizing, educational, and curatorial work.

Despite this, the educators in the curatorial team had to demonstrate, already at the initial stage of the work on the concept, that they were very well prepared factually. It was only then that they were able to convince other employees and superiors to accept their idea. Let us, at the same time, not forget that as much as curators consolidate their expertise while fulfilling their responsibilities, educators gain knowledge as if on the margin of their daily educational activity. Such differing work conditions lead to the preconception that the basic work of educators is less prominent factually, which eventually suggests that the roles and tasks of the two professional groups should be separated.

The basic work of educators in shifting the field of museum education is also the exposing of one's experience

and education, and not merely the boosting of one's potential by additional training. What is of more relevance is the clear and decisive communicating of the usefulness of respective individuals for the process of co-creating an exhibition, with a clear marking of one's advantages and limits of one's own competences. On the initial level this can assume the form of a document containing the 'inventory' of those competences and knowledge, submitted to the decision-making instances. This step should finally influence the rethinking about the means of creating and operating of curatorial teams, so that an exhibition is mounted as a result of a team work, with the use of expertise, as well as didactic, psychological, and communication knowledge. In order to reach this point it is essential to draw attention not only to the display as space of synergy of various competences, but first of all to continuously emphasize diversity and quality of educators' background.

Field shift: institutional trust

In order for the field of museum education to shift towards the operations of curatorial teams it is also essential to win institutional trust. In the hierarchical management model characterizing Polish museums this requires talking to the management and top-down legitimization connected with the testing of new intradepartmental cooperation models.²⁸ Exhibitions such as the *Museum Power* could have never been mounted had it not been for the support of the decision-makers, allowing to change the so-far balance of force and responsibilities. At the same time, an important part of the process of extending the field of museum education had to occur on the level of informal interpersonal relationships.²⁹ The necessary condition which, however, is not sufficient was making sure that *communication was clean*, as verbalised by one of the interviewed conservators. The communication in this case is both formal and informal (talks in the hall, showing positive feelings towards others, trust). When actions beyond the routine, outside the usual and verified working pathways are undertaken communicating about it at various stages of the work is important: from the first presentation of the exhibition concept to the curatorial tour of the exhibition for the staff of museum's various departments. It is this curatorial tour that we consider as being of vital significance for the approval and appreciation of the exhibition's worth by museum's professional staff. Additionally, it is of key importance for the project team to have among them individuals who can act as mediators and at the same time advocates for the new concepts. In the case of the *Museum Power* Exhibition such people were the Exhibition coordinator and the preventive officer.

Therefore, transparent communication and attempts at creating new, even if ephemeral, cooperation schemes are necessary, since tools and procedures which would create appropriate spaces allowing to bring forth and apply educational competences are lacking in the most frequently applied modes of mounting exhibitions. We thus recommend exerting pressure in order to delineate space for experiment combining prospects for individuals employed at various departments within an exhibition production process. In our view, it is important for the most intense possible involvement

of educators in the meetings among the museum community when scenarios and arrangement ideas are valued. The consolidation of the position of education may also contribute to developing informal networks for potential factual cooperation. Importantly, however, let us be clear that we do not mean here work outside the regular office hours, although it is quite obvious that many of the valuable initiatives could be implemented only thanks to similar overtime projects. Such was the case of the *Museum Power* Exhibition: *Our Exhibition could succeed only because we all consented to accept much more workload than before. This really required determination from us* (Exhibition curators).

The initial goal of those activities was to introduce additional perspectives to the display, and later to delineate translation surfaces which would allow a joint creation of the display content and forms following the process of re-inventing the distribution of the responsibilities today often assigned to curators, such as research work, work connected with the transmission of knowledge to respective groups of the public, work on the arrangement, and design of carriers.

Discussion

It was already 10 years ago that Janusz Byszewski wrote as follows, quite evidently provoking the museum circles: *It cannot be ruled out that it will be precisely new educators: museum animators who will in the future have the greatest impact on the change of the currently valid models of the museum as an institution.*³⁰ A similar undertone could be felt in the statement of one of the participants of the seminars held by the Forum of Museum Educators: *I am of the opinion that education departments hide a great potential for changing museums as institutions. This, however, requires time.*³¹ Today, it is still thought that precisely the educational character of museums legitimizes their importance within the socio-cultural field, and secures the egalitarian future of those institutions. The redefinition of the role of education departments and their actual involvement in curatorial practices is thus important in view of a wider process in today's museology. Education is of key importance in the perspective of creating a responsible policy of accessibility, participation, and of redirecting museums towards spaces where knowledge is co-created.

The research into the *Museum Power* Exhibition has demonstrated that the competences and the capacity of contemporary educators go far beyond the institutional framework within which their activity is inscribed. However, the Exhibition's implementation allows to identify guidelines on what the change deriving from the potential of education departments can look like. This change, despite featuring its genuine character, has allowed us to delineate three basic spheres for the extension of the museum education field: within the attitude to the character and mode of conveying knowledge (it is essential to build a complex 'presence strategy' of education in teams, discussions, concepts, programmes, and in wider fora, and to reveal the multiplicity of competences which affect the shape of museum practices); within the change in perceiving educators' competences (through a continuous, clearcut communicating a varied quality of their education and professional experience); and finally, within the range of new forms of institutionalizing work on a display (by creating space

for experiment and testing new models of mounting displays). We are of the opinion that change only on one of those levels can bring to a halt even the already initially inaugurated process; meanwhile, activities within each of those spheres may constitute a minimum allowing to make an 'educational

turn' in the production of museum exhibitions. The turn can be regarded as successful when a stable open institutional framework is created in which curators and educators stand side by side elaborating exhibitions stemming from experiments within the sphere of creating and conveying knowledge.

Abstract: The paper presents the research project implemented by the staff of the University of Silesia in Katowice during the *Museum Power* Exhibition at the National Museum in Krakow. The semiotic interpretation of the data amassed in FGIs and IGIs, these enriched with class observations, Desk Research, as well as the analysis of purpose-created documents, allowed to fulfil the goal of the investigation. The interdepartmental cooperation launched when educators became Exhibition's curators was of the main interest to the researchers. These actions were considered as examples of the implementation of the 'educational turn' in Polish museology where tendencies to clearly separate and differently evaluate curatorial and educational practices are distinctly visible.

The analysis of the manners of extending fields of museum education by educators-curators enabled the identification of a set of recommendations for initiating display projects implemented and co-created by the education department staff. In the presentation of the research results the focus has been put on three areas in which the shift was observed: types of knowledge organizing thinking about the display; perception and application of educators' competences; and shaping informal relations and producing institutional trust. The paper speaks in favour of the necessity to take into account the experience and competences of the education department employees when creating valuable exhibitions and consolidating good relations with committed public.

Keywords: curator, educator, exhibition, field of museum education, educational turn.

Endnotes

- ¹ For more information on the Exhibition <https://mnk.pl/wystawy/moc-muzeum> (Accessed: 31 July 2023).
- ² I. Rogoff, 'Turning', *e-Flux Journal*, 00 (2008), pp. 1-6.
- ³ I. Pérez López, 'Museum Education and the Epistemological Turn', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, 2021.
- ⁴ R. Lemay-Perreault, 'L'Éducation comme média artistique: À la recherche d'une interactivité nouvelle', *Canadian Review of Art Education*, 1 (43, 2016), pp. 40-57.
- ⁵ I. Pérez López, *op. cit.*
- ⁶ We would like to extend our gratitude to the Reviewers for pointing to valuable contexts and sharing important remarks enriching the paper.
- ⁷ For the most complex research into the condition of museum education see *Edukacja muzealna w Polsce. Sytuacja, kontekst, perspektywy rozwoju. Raport o stanie edukacji muzealnej w Polsce*, ed. by M. Szelaąg, Warszawa 2012. The Report was supplemented two years later. For the current research in the Anglo-Saxon context see D.C. Kletchka, 'Art Museum Educators: Who Are They now?', *Curator. The Museum Journal*, 1 (64, 2021), pp. 79-97.
- ⁸ See *Raport o stanie edukacji muzealnej. Suplement. Część 1*, ed. by M. Szelaąg, Kraków 2014, p. 25.
- ⁹ E. Nieroba, 'Muzeum jako przestrzeń dialogu. O koncepcji zwrotu edukacyjnego w muzeum', *Kultura Współczesna*, 2 (2019), p. 109.
- ¹⁰ W. Kowalczyk, 'Celebrować, zabawiać czy edukować? Po co społeczeństwu są dziś publiczne muzea?', *Muzealnictwo*, 51 (2010), p. 60.
- ¹¹ E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, London 2015.
- ¹² See *Edukacja muzealna. Antologia tłumaczeń*, ed. by M. Szelaąg, J. Skutnik, Poznań 2010; R. Pater, *Edukacja muzealna – muzea dla dzieci i młodzieży*, Kraków 2016.
- ¹³ M. Parczewska, 'Partycypacja – czyli sztuka spotkania', in: *Muzeum XXI wieku – teoria i praxis*, ed. by E. Kowalska, E. Urbaniak, Gniezno 2010, pp. 189-191; K. Jagodzińska, 'Partycypacja publiczności w polskich muzeach', *Muzealnictwo*, 62 (2021), pp. 189-197. Let us not overlook critical analyses of participatory art; see C. Bishop, *Sztuczne piekła. Sztuka partycypacyjna i polityka widowni*, trans. by J. Staniszewski, Warszawa 2015.
- ¹⁴ E. Nieroba, *Pomiędzy dobrem wspólnym a elitarnością. Współczesny model muzeum*, Opole 2016, pp. 137-153; A. Tołysz, 'Muzeum w procesie. Wybrane tendencje w muzealnictwie XX wieku', *Muzealnictwo*, 61 (2020), pp. 96-105; C. Gray, V. McCall, *The Role of Today's Museum*, London 2020.
- ¹⁵ F. Portin, K. Grinell, 'The Diplomatic Museum: A Latourian Perspective on the Civic Role of Museums', *Curator. The Museum Journal*, 64 (2021), pp. 675-691.
- ¹⁶ M. Kobielska, 'Wymyślanie muzeum relacyjnego', *Muzealnictwo*, 63 (2022), pp. 128-133.
- ¹⁷ M. Otmianowska, 'Społeczna odpowiedzialność edukacji muzealnej. Kierunki badań', *Seminare. Poszukiwania Naukowe*, 4 (41, 2020), pp. 81-91; K. Jagodzińska, 'Muzeum odpowiedzialne? (Na przykładzie Muzeum Zabawek w Krakowie)', *Muzealnictwo*, 63 (2022), pp. 150-157.
- ¹⁸ J.T.E. Richardson, D. Kletchka, 'Museum Education for Disability Justice and Liberatory Access', *Journal of Museum Education*, 2 (47, 2022), 138-149; B. Ziebarth, J. Majewski, 'Museum Crip Space, By Any Other Name', *Journal of Museum Education*, 2 (47, 2022), pp. 179-191.
- ¹⁹ E.R. Zinn, 'Please Touch the Artifacts: Education and Collections Departments Co-design an Exhibit for Family Audiences to Practice Primary Source Inquiry', *Journal of Museum Education*, 3 (47, 2022), pp. 353-365.
- ²⁰ Some meetings were face-to-face, some were conducted on-line.
- ²¹ E. Babbie, *Badania społeczne w praktyce*, trans. by Witold Betkiewicz, Warszawa 2003, pp. 397-437.
- ²² *Institutional Critique. An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, ed. by A. Alberro, B. Stimson, Cambridge 2011.
- ²³ See P. Grabowski, 'Kapłan, wizja i zakon – czyli zarządzanie a świątynia sztuki', in: *Etnografia organizacji. Badania polskich firm i instytucji*, academic ed. by M. Kostera, Gdańsk 2011, pp. 76-95.
- ²⁴ The Exhibition was targeted at an individual visitor and small groups of the public. The targeted public was wide: adults, teenagers, and older children.

- ²⁵ Description fragments at the Exhibition.
- ²⁶ Description fragments at the Exhibition.
- ²⁷ E. Nieroba, 'Muzeum empatyczne. O zmieniającej się roli odbiorcy kultury we współczesnym świecie w opinii muzealników', in: *Muzea w kulturze współczesnej*, ed. by A. Ziębińska-Witek, G. Żuk, Lublin 2015, pp. 168-169.
- ²⁸ See K. Barańska, *Muzeum w sieci znaczeń. Zarządzanie z perspektywy nauk humanistycznych*, Kraków 2013, pp. 193-221.
- ²⁹ See *Raport o stanie edukacji muzealnej. Suplement. Część 1...*, pp. 52-53.
- ³⁰ J. Byszewski, 'Muzeum jako „rzeźba społeczna”', in: *Muzeum XXI wieku...*, p. 64.
- ³¹ *Raport o stanie edukacji muzealnej. Suplement. Część 1...*, p. 53.

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